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ABSTRACT

In order to determine whether a program of black literature read aloud to a group of black fourth-grade children would have a measurable effect on posttest scores of two self-concept measures, an experimental group of 23 black children was exposed to 36 sessions of children's literature about black figures--historical and fictional--who were strong, positive characters with whom the children could identify. A second group of 23 black children listened to children's literature without black characters, while a third group had no literature read to them. The children in the three groups were nearly equal in sex, age, grade, and intelligence, and all were pretested and posttested. Analysis of data shows that such a direct approach does promote a stronger self-concept and that the type of test used to measure self-concept may strongly influence the results. (JH)

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DOES LITERATURE AFFECT
SELF-CONCEPT?

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DOES LITERATURE AFFECT SELF-CONCEPT?

In an attempt to determine the effect of literature on the self-concept of children, a study was devised using a group of minority children whose self-concepts might be considered to be lower than the self-concepts of other children.

This lowered self-esteem has been thought to be the result of 200 years of denial of the Negro's identity, history, and literature. Many Negro children have been told in various ways, both verbal and non-verbal, that they are inferior. Eunice Hewton states that "the so-called minority child learns of his assigned inferior status at an early age and as a result experiences deep feelings of humiliation and rejection."¹ She points to the lack of social support for positive self-esteem as a causal factor in the child's confusion about his personal worth. Personality theorists point to the importance of self-concept in the development of a fully functioning human being. Many educators believe it to be a crucial factor in the learning process.

A number of research studies have been conducted in an attempt to evaluate procedures or methods of altering self-concept. Studies by Allen,² Carlton and Moore,³ Smith,⁴ Payne and Dunn,⁵ and Whisenton⁶ reveal the effect of dramatics, multi-ethnic readers, personal interaction, counseling and various methods of reading instruction on the self-concept of Black children. Other studies by Roth⁷ and Georgeoff⁸ seem to indicate that "Black Studies" may be a means toward the goal of a more positive self-concept, although a recent study by Grant⁹ revealed

that significant positive changes were affected by a Black Studies program but there was no significant effect in self-concept.

The purpose of the research described in this article was to ascertain if a program of Negro literature read aloud to a group of 23 Negro children would have a measurable effect on their post test scores of two self-concept measures. The literature was carefully selected to include only those Negro figures, heroes and heroines, who were strong, positive characters with whom the child could identify. Studies by Agnes,¹⁰ Smith,¹¹ ^o Lahar,¹² and Yawkey¹³ exploring the impact of literature on children supported the hypothesis that Black literature would indeed affect the self-concept of the Black child.

Three groups of 23 fourth grade Negro children were chosen in a Negro elementary school in a southern city. The selection of the group to be the experimental group was made randomly. This experimental group was exposed to 36 sessions (30 minutes each over a three month period) of children's literature about Negro figures, both historic and fictional. A placebo group was formed to compensate for the Hawthorne effect, in which 23 fourth grade Negro children were exposed to children's literature without Negro characters. A third group of 23 Negro fourth graders had no literature read to them and acted as a second control group. The three groups approached equality in terms of sex, age, grade, and intelligence (based on the California Mental Maturity Test).

All 69 children were pre-tested and post-tested using the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Test and the Children's Self-Social Constructs Test.

The Piers-Harris Self-Concept Test was designed primarily for research on the development of children's attitudes toward self. The 80 items are simple declarative statements such as "I am a happy person." At least half of the items are stated negatively, "I do many bad things."

The Children's Self-Social Constructs Test is a non-verbal approach developed by Long, Henderson and Teller using the self-symbols method. The subject is presented with a series of circles arranged either vertically or horizontally and asked to mark one which he chooses to represent himself. The test is based on the assumption that physical distance can be equated with psychological distance in the placement of self to others. A top to bottom and left to right value is also assumed in the scoring arrangement of the symbolic patterns. The self-social theory of personality also assumes that self-concept is the result of interpersonal experiences with others as revealed in the sub-categories of the test identification with mother, father, teacher, friends. Other categories are self-esteem (vertical and horizontal), social dependency, individualization and complexity.

An analysis of variance of the pre-test post-test scores of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Test revealed a change toward a more negative self-concept in the experimental group significant at the .05 level of confidence. However, the Children's Self-Social Constructs Tests revealed a statistically significant positive change in the pre-test post-test scores of the experimental group on the items of vertical esteem, horizontal esteem, and identification with mother and friends. Post-test scores of all groups revealed less complexity, individualization, and identification with teacher at the end of the experimental period. All groups had scores which revealed greater identification with father.

The results of the analysis of the data suggest several conclusions. A program of Negro literature read orally may possibly affect the self-

concept of fourth grade Negro children. The primary indications of this are in the significant gains in horizontal and vertical esteem on the Children's Self-Social Constructs Test of the experimental group. In these items the child is not evaluating himself in relationship to a specifically designated significant person, such as mother, father, teacher or friends, but in relationship to a group of undesignated others. This fact would lead to the placing of more weight on these two items than on items in which the child is giving a partial representation of himself in relation to only one significant other.

Comparison of the pre-test post-test scores of the experimental group on the Piers-Harris Test and the Children's Self-Social Constructs Test suggest that the type of test used to measure self-concept may strongly influence the results. On the non-verbal Children's Self-Social Constructs Test, children were unable to "guess" which answer was the more socially desirable and were therefore probably less able to "fake" an image which they might wish to present. In addition, the children in the experimental group were extremely hostile about taking the Piers-Harris Self-Concept test at the conclusion of the experimental period in contrast to their willingness to respond to the Children's Self-Social Constructs Test in which they marked the circles and symbols with crayolas which they thought was "fun." Perhaps part of their rejection of the Piers-Harris scale was that there were many phrases and words which were difficult for them to understand, such as "popularity, volunteering, obedient, clumsy, pep, disappointed," etc. Their overt expression of their feelings and opinions regarding the testing could be a result of stronger awareness of themselves

as significant individuals. Seeing oneself (or one's race) in a new light invariably presents new decisions about who one is, how one will behave and who one will become. Therefore, the Negro child's responses to tests with highly visible purposes such as the Piers-Harris Test may be more negative than to nonverbal measures such as the Children's Self-Social Constructs Test which are less open to conscious manipulation.

Expressions throughout the treatment period from children in the experimental group indicated that there was a credibility gap between them and the literature. That, in fact, they could not quite grasp the fact that these people were Negroes. They asked over and again, "Is he black like James?" "Is he black like Clyde?" In some of the books, particularly Little Vic (Doris Gates) which was written in 1951, this difficulty could be expected since race was not a primary factor in the plot line (although at least two incidents and one relationship described in the book are totally dependent on understanding that "Pony" is black.) However, in others, notably Frederick Douglass by Arna Bontemps, which is illustrated and Jane Wagner's J.T. which has photographs, the same question was asked repeatedly. It seemed that the children were struggling to identify with the characters and not quite believing that they could. The most popular of the books read, V. A. Hamilton's The House of Dies Drear had such blurred, indistinct illustrations that it was difficult to identify the characters as Negro. Other books used in the experimental group were She Wanted to Read, The Story of Mary McLeod Bethune (Ella Kaiser Carruth), Harriet Tubman: Guide to Freedom (Sam and Beryl Epstein), John Henry and

His Hammer (Harold Felton), Lelly (Virginia Hamilton), John Henry (Ezra Jack Keats), Corrie and the Yankee (Ilimi Cooper Levy), Martin Luther King: Fighter for Freedom (Edward Preston).

The immeasurable responses of these children, as well as the scores on the Children's Self-Social Constructs Tests seem to indicate that a direct approach to enhancing self-concept primarily through strengthening a positive racial image does indeed promote a stronger self-concept. The use of children's literature which holds the Negro in high esteem seems to be a useful avenue to this result.

TABLE 1

RESULTS

	MEANS		F-Ratio	Level of Probability
	Trial 1	Trial 2		
Piers-Harris				
Expr.	61.7826	59.1304	4.012	.0549
Con. 1	56.2174	61.3043	5.389	.0283
Con. 2	61.5217	62.3043	1.934	.1753
Vertical				
Expr.	11.5217	14.4783	4.084	.0529
Con. 1	10.7391	12.2174	1.463	.2377
Con. 2	11.6522	13.0000	1.934	.1753
Horizontal				
Expr.	26.0435	31.6522	8.267	.0086
Con. 1	26.5652	28.3043	2.101	.1582
Con. 2	30.7391	33.0435	2.295	.1407
Complexity				
Expr.	8.3478	8.1304	.142	.7104
Con. 1	8.7391	8.2174	2.386	.1334
Con. 2	8.6087	7.5652	9.673	.0052
Individuation				
Expr.	2.0435	1.6957	1.561	.2227
Con. 1	1.9565	1.8696	.128	.7236
Con. 2	1.3478	1.3043	.046	.8270
Identification				
With Mother				
Expr.	13.6522	15.1304	6.438	.0178
Con. 1	13.6087	12.4783	2.622	.1162
Con. 2	14.9130	16.0870	5.655	.0251
With Father				
Expr.	13.6522	14.3478	.939	.6550
Con. 1	12.6087	13.3478	.491	.5028
Con. 2	14.4783	15.2609	1.271	.2713
With teacher				
Expr.	16.0435	15.9130	.009	.9230
Con. 1	14.9130	14.5652	.199	.6634
Con. 2	17.3913	15.6957	1.249	.2754
With friends				
Expr.	15.0000	17.7826	8.130	.0091
Con. 1	15.8693	16.6087	.300	.5957
Con. 2	17.6522	19.5652	4.901	.0355

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